

The Neoteric generation

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1. The Neoterics

Where should we look for the Neoteric generation? Classical scholarship only knows the “Neoteric poets”. That term is modern, but it was inspired by a statement of Cicero’s. Writing to his friend Atticus from Brundisium in late 50 BCE, he described his passage from Greece with a hexameter, *flavit ab Epiro lenissimus Onchesmites*, and he added that Atticus could sell this line as his own to a member of the *avant-garde*, if he liked and this passage is on the handout in Latin, as are all others that I will discuss): *hunc σπονδειαίζοντα si cui uoles τῶν νεωτέρων pro tuo uendito*. “You could sell that spondaic verse as your own to one of the *avant-garde*, if you like.” Cicero implies that the νεώτεροι would be likely to appreciate this verse. Oliver Lyne notes that “[t]he antonomasia, the euphonic sibilance, and the mannered rhythm ... are all prominent in Cicero’s hexameter.”¹ These features reappear in the hexameters of Catullus, notably in his poem 64, and one may reasonably want to assign him to the *avant-garde* or νεώτεροι mentioned by Cicero. However, Cicero used a plural, and he was writing in 50 BCE, while Catullus had already died in or soon after 54; so we need to find several other “Neoterics” alongside Catullus. Modern scholars generally assume that Cicero refers to the same group in two other passages: when he observes at *Orator* 161 that the *poetae noui* reject the old licence of dropping the letter *s* at word-end; and when he exclaims at *Tusculanae Disputationes* 3.45 that Ennius is an excellent poet, even if he is contemned by the *cantores Euphorionis*, the poets writing in the style of Euphorion, that most difficult of Hellenistic poets. It should be noted that the term “Neoteric poets” is not ancient; but it is helpful to have a name for a rather homogenous group of poets from the end of the Roman Republic.

Who were they? The problem is that the works of all “Neoterics” except for Catullus have been lost, save for a handful of fragments. However, the surviving fragments of a number of contemporary poets strongly suggest that they too should be ascribed to this

¹ Lyne 1978, 167.

group. These poets are C. Helvius Cinna, C. Licinius Calvus, Valerius Cato, M. Furius Bibaculus, and possibly also L. Ticius. They were active in the last decades of the Roman Republic; Catullus' datable poems were written between 56 and 54 BCE, while the chronology of the other members of the group is uncertain. The "Neoterics" have been characterised by Glenn Most as

"a small group of poets, bound by youth, friendship, shared poetic principles, and contempt for the uninitiated, poets who each composed as sole masterpiece one ... *epyllion* in dactylic hexameters and who published one ... *liber* combining that *epyllion* with short poems in lyrical meters and in elegiac distichs and with more extended *Gelegenheitsgedichte* in lyrical meters and/or dactylic hexameters".²

However, it now appears unlikely that Catullus should have published his poems himself in one single book.³

Scholars have debated whether the "Neoterics" formed a closed circle or a more open group. In this paper I propose a variant of the second view: that their poetry reflected the values and interests of a significant part of contemporary society. The relationship of the "Neoterics" to their generation could be compared to that of the "Beat poets" to the "Beat generation". Far from being an isolated coterie, they represented trends that were typical of a part of the society of contemporary Rome and Italy.

The social context of the Neoterics has already been studied up to a point by Wiseman (1985) and by Griffin (1986). But has it been studied enough? And have we found out all that we can about their intellectual context? I believe that we have not, and that it is worthwhile to take a closer look at these matters. I will try to do so here. Some aspects of the problem call for much more attention than what is permitted by the scope of this paper; others can be dealt with sufficiently. One task that is relatively easy is to set out the evidence at our disposal for the generation of young men that the "Neoteric poets" could represent, given that our evidence for them (as for much of Roman social history) is rather limited.

² Most 1981, 113.

³ See Butrica 2007.

2. The *jeunesse dorée* of the late Roman Republic

It is a commonplace throughout much of ancient literature that young men are prone to love affairs, hedonism, and outright decadence. But when sources from the last decades of the Roman Republic attribute such behaviour to the contemporary youth, this appears to reflect reality as much as literary commonplaces.

Writing to Atticus in March 60 BCE (*Att.* 1.19.8), Cicero boasts that he has managed to obtain the support of the hedonistic young men of Rome:

“The hostility excited against me in the minds of our lustful and luxurious young men has been so mitigated by what I may call my affability that they all make me the object of their special attention.”

Cicero characterizes these young men as *libidinosi* and *delicati*, “lustful and luxurious”. Three years earlier he had described a very similar group of young men among the adherents of the Catilinarian conspiracy in his *Second Speech against Catiline* (22-23). There he used a rather different tone:

“The final group [of conspirators] is last not only in sequence but also on account of its breed and behaviour, being Catiline’s very own circle, coming from his personal levy, and indeed from his embrace and his lap. You see them gleam with their freshly combed hair, either beardless or with a full beard, wearing tunics with sleeves that reach their ankles, and veils, not togas. All their hard work and their efforts at vigilance are expended towards dinners before dawn. All gamblers, all adulterers, all tainted perverts belong to this group. These elegant and luxurious boys have learnt not only to love and to be loved, nor to dance and to sing, but also to brandish daggers and to sprinkle poison. As long as they do not leave [the city], even if Catiline does go out, you must know that there will be a seedbed of Catilines in this country. But what do those wretches want for themselves? They will not bring their little women along with them to the camp, will they? How will they cope without them, especially on nights such as these? And how will they bear the Appennines and

their hoar-frost and their snows? But perhaps they think that they will be able to bear the winter better because they have learnt to dance naked at parties.

Cicero's words are clearly malicious, but they must contain some truth in order to be rhetorically effective. One should note the concrete details that he offers about the hairstyle, beard, and dress of these young dandies, as well as his allusions to sophisticated parties, and his insistence on the theme of love, including homosexual love.

To my mind these two passages from Cicero offer the strongest evidence for the existence of a recognisable class of *jeunesse dorée* at the end of the Roman republic. Their strength lies in the fact that they come not from texts written primarily for the sake of posterity or the general reader, but from a letter and a speech. The long passage from the *Second Speech against Catiline* also offers a wealth of detail about the lifestyle and interests, presumed or real, of these young men. The picture is reinforced by further sources. One is Cicero's speech *pro Caelio*, delivered in 56 BCE, which offers a notable amount of information on the lifestyle of a wealthy, stylish and ambitious young man, M. Caelius Rufus, and his love affair with Clodia Metelli, a middle-aged widow who was the sister of the tribune P. Clodius Pulcher. It should be noted that Catullus' beloved Lesbia has been identified with one or other of the three sisters of the tribune; and that some scholars have identified the Caelius mentioned by Catullus at 58.1 with M. Caelius Rufus. Cicero does not describe a part of contemporary society in his speech, but only patterns of behaviour on the part of his defendant and others that fit the patterns described in the *Second Speech against Catiline*, and he makes a general plea for leniency towards hedonistically minded young men such as Caelius:

"Let young men be allowed to enjoy themselves; may they be given a certain freedom; let not all kinds of pleasure be forbidden to them; let the right and straight path not always reign supreme; let desire and pleasure prevail at times over reason, so long as restraint and moderation are exercised in these matters."

The *jeunesse dorée* reappear in Sallust's *Conspiracy of Catiline* (14.5-7), where we read that Catiline "sought out especially the company of young men" and that "to some he provided prostitutes, and to others he sold dogs and horses." Sallust adds that "I know

that there have been some who thought that the young men who flocked to Catiline's house did not treat their chastity respectably", that is to say, they accepted the passive role in homosexual intercourse; but the historian notes that these allegations are not backed up by evidence. Sallust draws heavily on the speeches of Cicero in the *Catiline*, so he cannot be regarded as an independent source; but it is important that he regards it as plausible that that Catiline should have been especially popular among the hedonistically minded young men in Rome.

There emerges a picture of a class of well-to-do young men with a hedonistic agenda. According to our sources, they pursued an enjoyable and above all a stylish life, which manifested itself in their dress, beards, hairstyle, and parties; and they appear to have had a marked interest in love and sex, whether of women or of men.

If the life of pleasure was fashionable in the late Roman Republic, the philosophical school that provided a backdrop to it also enjoyed notable popularity. Writing about the rise of Epicureanism at *Tusculanae Disputationes* 4.3.6-7, Cicero states that it became popular with the writings of C. Amafinius, who may have been active around 60 B.C.E. or a little earlier; others went on to produce many more Epicurean texts; and *Italiam totam occupauerunt*, "they have occupied all of Italy". At *De Finibus* 1.7.25 Cicero tries to answer the frequent question *cur tam multi sint Epicurei*, "why there are so many Epicureans". And in the *pro Caelio* (41) he notes that those philosophers who have not set out pleasure as a principal goal of life have been left nearly alone in their schools. The spread of the new school has been described by Boyancé (1960) and Erler (1994), and it has been illustrated by Castner (1988) in her *Prosopography of Roman Epicureans*. Famous Epicureans in the last decades of the Roman Republic included L. Calpurnius Piso Caesoninus, the patron of the Greek philosopher Philodemus, many of whose writings have survived at the "Villa dei Papiri" in Herculaneum; Lucretius' patron C. Memmius; C. Cassius Longinus; probably also C. Iulius Caesar; and possibly also Cicero's friend T. Pomponius Atticus.

The life of love

How does all this relate to the poetry of Catullus and his fellow "Neoterics"?

Our sources attribute to the Roman *jeunesse dorée* the pursuit of an enjoyable and above all, a stylish life; and a marked interest in love and sex. These interests reappear in the writings of the “Neoteric” poets.

Love and sex are a key theme in the poetry of Catullus, and not only on account of his passion for a woman called Lesbia. In several poems he describes his attraction towards Iuuentius, a young man from an aristocratic family, while in poem 32 he humorously invites himself for an erotic siesta to a young woman who appears to have been a prostitute. Poem 41 starts with an indignant outburst: “that fucked-up girl Ameana / asked me a full ten thousand”, a tariff that is not justified by her rather limited array of charms, which the poet describes in detail. Love and sex are prominent also in Catullus’ more elaborate, longer poems, even where the subject-matter is mythological: for example, 61 and 62 are wedding songs, 64 describes the wedding of Peleus and Thetis as well as the unhappy love of Ariadna for Theseus, and 67 describes a scandalous and rather complex erotic intrigue in the city of Brescia.

The other “Neoterics” too appear to have been interested in love and sex. Calvus composed an epyllion about Io, the heroine who became pregnant from Zeus, and wrote about his deceased former lover Quintilia. Cinna devoted an epyllion to Zmyrna, a princess from Cyprus who fell in love with her father. There survives a fragment of a wedding song in which Ticide calls the wedding couch happy because of the sex that will take place on it. Catullus seems to have made a rather similar point in a passage in poem 61 that is conserved only in part.

A desire for a quality life is another central theme, albeit a less obvious one, of the poetry of Catullus and his fellow “Neoterics”. Direct acknowledgements of hedonism are rare: the Catullian corpus contains a drinking song (poem 27) and an invitation to a sophisticated dinner party (poem 13). The importance of style becomes more clear when it is lacking. In poem 52 Catullus asks himself why he does not kill himself now that “the goitre Nonius is sitting in a curule chair, and Vatinius swears falsely by his consulship”, which lies in the distant future. Elsewhere too Catullus criticises people for aesthetic deficiencies ranging from ugliness through a lack of personal hygiene to crass ostentation. Calvus displays the same attitude when he criticises Pompey for the habit of scratching his head in an effeminate way (Calvus frg. 18 C.).

But it is in poetry that a desire for quality in life manifests itself the most clearly. When Catullus introduces his book of verse in his first poem, he describes it as “a nice little book-roll, freshly polished with dry pumice-stone.” It is not only the contents of a book that have to be attractive, but its exterior too must display an understated, polished elegance. This is as much as a “Neoteric” poet is allowed to boast. It seems that for the “Neoterics” one has to be stylish without seeming to make an effort, in the same way that poetry has to be exquisite but unpretentious. More than once Catullus refers to his poems as *nugae*, meaning “nonsense”, “silly games”. The dangers of excess are shown by the poetaster Suffenus, who uses the best materials money can buy for his books of verse, but once he opens them, (I quote Catullus 22): “[h]e who had appeared a dandy or even more refined than one, turns out to be more boorish than the most boorish wasteland, as soon as he puts his hand to writing poetry ...”

However, poetry can also serve as a fashionable accessory that helps one to enjoy life more, as becomes apparent from a fragment of Cinna’s about an exotic gift:

“These poems, the product of many hours of toil besides Aratus’ lamp, thanks to which we know the nightly skies, copied onto a little booklet made of dry mallow-bark, these I have brought for you in a little Bithynian boat.”

Cinna presents his addressee with a book that is admirable for three reasons. First, because of its contents: it contains the poems of Aratus, a learned and well-wrought composition. Second, because of its material: it has been written on dry mallow-bark, which makes it a rarity. Third, on account of its exotic provenance: it is a gift from the distant region of Bithynia.

Epicureanism and the “Neoterics”

Catullus and his fellow “Neoterics” appreciated life’s pleasures in general, and love and sex in particular; but were they Epicureans? There were certainly a number of Epicureans in Catullus’ environment; a list can be found on my handout. It should be noted in any case that we can only identify a small fraction of the many Epicureans living in contemporary Rome.

The surviving fragments of all “Neoterics” apart from Catullus do not permit us to judge to what degree they were influenced by Epicureanism. In the case of Catullus, its influence seems to have been significant and extensive, but imperfect in the sense that he probably did not subscribe to all of Epicurus’ teachings. When he tries to win over Lesbia for a shared life of love, he argues (in poem 5, lines 4-5): “Suns can set and return; but when our brief light sets, we will have to sleep one eternal night.” It is a commonplace of ancient poetry since Theognis at least that one should yield to love because youth is fleeting, and life is short; but the breadth of Catullus’ statement about mortality may be seen to suggest a grounding in Epicurean philosophy. However, in poem 96 (and also in 101) Catullus hesitantly admits the possibility of life after death, and in poem 76 he prays to the gods in utter distress. It may perhaps be fair to characterise him as a man stuck between two worlds, conservative Roman religious thought and modern Epicurean philosophy. Further influences of contemporary Epicurean philosophy as reflected by the writings of Philodemus have been detected in Catullus’ poetry by Giuffrida (1950) and Landolfi (1982); notably, Catullus’ contrast in poem 95 of his and his friend Cinna’s literary preferences with the tastes of the *vulgus* or populace may have been influenced by Epicurus’ elitism. However, the subject still has to be studied at a greater depth.

Conclusion: Looking forward

In this paper I have tried to demonstrate that the poems of Catullus and the “Neoterics” reflect tendencies and values that were typical of a generation of well-to-do young men in the late Roman Republic. Despite occasional claims to the contrary, they were not an isolated literary coterie, but were firmly rooted in, and somewhat typical of, the society that surrounded them.

This has some bearing on the debate whether Catullus and his friends were writing about their lives, or whether they were putting onto paper a literary fiction. In my view they wrote about their lives most of their time, and they recreated on paper not only the values, but also the very life of the “Neoteric generation”. I would like to add that I do not want to cobble together from Catullus’ short poems a “Catullroman”, which is what biographical critics are sometimes supposed to do; rather, I see individual poems as giving us occasional glimpses into contemporary reality, and sometimes as recreating the social life of the “Neoteric generation”. But that is a topic for another paper.